

Mohan Peck
United Nations
Remarks at Opening Session

On behalf of the United Nations, I am very pleased to welcome all of you to this conference. The issue of how to create more sustainable cities is creeping higher on the international agenda. This issue is being driven by a number of factors -- the dramatic economic growth of many emerging economies; the consequent rapid increase in urban-rural migration; the new focus on how to grow the green economy; and finally, the likely impacts of climate variability, namely water scarcity or flooding, on cities.

Cities are at the nexus of so much of the development dialogue because cities are where the majority of the people on the planet live, work, raise families and educate their children. Cities are where the rubber meets the road.

As a result, we expect that urbanization and sustainable cities will be a key part of the agenda of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development that will be held in 2012. Rio+20, as we call it, will be a milestone event that will likely set the development agenda for the next decade.

That's why it's so important that local authorities get engaged in the preparatory process for this conference. We want to make sure that your concerns, your problems, and your voices are heard as national governments strive to agree on the priorities for action in the decade to come.

With regard to the themes of the conference here this week, the United Nations has played a key role in the promotion of integrated water resources management as a primary approach for managing the natural resource base of the planet. Key to these efforts were the Dublin Principles on water and sustainable development, Agenda 21, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, and the decisions taken at the 13th session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development.

A working definition of sustainable water management should likely include at least the following key elements:

1. Holistic water resource planning aligned with national development strategies and investment plans implemented by empowered public institutions. This planning should take an inclusive multi-stakeholder approach with a strong gender dimension.
2. Efforts to enhance water use efficiency and productivity, both urban and rural. This includes the use of more efficient technologies, supported by appropriate water use fees and pollution penalties.
3. Management of competing water uses by agriculture, industry and municipalities, either by government regulation or market mechanisms.
4. Protection of water quality and ecosystems, taking a river basin approach that includes both surface and ground water, to ensure adequate water flows for ecosystems. This would also include water pollution prevention efforts, particularly related to industrial effluent, agricultural pesticides and urban sewage systems.
5. Preventing water-related natural disasters by protecting wetlands, forests and other ecosystems that regulate water flow and retention. This would also include investment in infrastructure, like dams, reservoirs, dikes and canals.

Let me turn now to another theme of the conference, which is -- how can we improve the contribution of water management to poverty reduction – in other words, what actions can we take to make water more accessible to poor urban communities.

I believe there is a generally accepted framework for action to improve water security for the poor, and it contains several key elements.

The first element is -- we have to strengthen pro-poor water governance. This means adopting appropriate policies, laws and outreach programs that specifically target the urban poor, and women in particular.

Second, we have to increase access of the poor to quality water services for better health. This includes clean drinking water, as well as water for sanitation and hygiene.

Third, we must provide water for economic opportunities and improved livelihoods. In urban and peri-urban areas this means water supply for entrepreneurial activities and light manufacturing.

Fourth, we have to invest in training in poor communities to help them participate in the management of their water resources, to better negotiate access to water services, and to ensure gender equity in water management.

Finally, we should address disaster prevention and mitigation in order to improve the resilience of the poor to water-related disasters, which can destroy the very fabric of their lives.

Let me stop there, but before closing allow me to direct a few words to the mayors and urban leaders who are present. I know that as leaders you want to make your mark and leave some meaningful legacy of your efforts toward building a better city. Your administrations are working hard to provide drinking water, sanitation and other water-related services. But you may not be able to reach all, particularly the poor and those living in slums. You may ask yourself -- What can I do to reach those un-served communities?

We are going to learn this week about many examples of innovative leadership from mayors and local water utilities who have faced the same or similar challenges as you face. We will try to distill the lessons of some of those experiences, to provide practical advice on policies and best practices. These will not be theoretical discussions; they will be based entirely on practical solutions to real world challenges.

So listen to the experts and counterparts from other cities who are gathered here. Their conditions may be different but many of the lessons learned may be transferable. Listen, interact, ask them questions, engage them one-on-one. In this way they may shed some light on your path as you move ahead.

Good luck to all of you.